Interview with John R. O'Brien

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JOHN R. O'BRIEN

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Q: Jack O'Brien was born in 1918 in Seattle, where he also started his career as a journalist. He went from Seattle to Hawaii, where he worked as a journalist, both as a reporter and as an editor until the beginning of World War II in December 1941.

After the war, he suddenly—or maybe not so suddenly—got involved in the kind of work that we are doing now, namely public diplomacy, and stayed in that work until he retired from USIA. When was that, Jack?

O'BRIEN: 1970.

Q: Just by way of starting this conversation, I've always felt that the whole impetus of public diplomacy, United States Information Cultural Activities aboard, started out from two different sources. One of them was the Cold War, really, with President Truman's "Campaign of Truth," in which he declared that the U.S. Government, the United States, must project itself abroad in whatever way it can to tell other peoples about its ideals and its own foreign policy in order to be able to oppose the efforts of the Soviet Union and

Communist countries to project their ideology on other peoples. That's one source of our work.

The other one, in my view, was the experiment that we undertook in the occupation of Germany, Japan, and Austria, the experiment of trying to reorient and re-educate an entire people toward democracy. We used all kinds of new methodology, both in the way of information and cultural programs. In this we were not always successful; in some areas we were successful. I think recent history has shown that we were, in many respects, successful in this.

At any rate, this was the other side of the coin that we practiced in what is now known as public diplomacy. The first question I want to ask you, Jack, is how did you get into this work. Tell me.

O'BRIEN: Having been brought up in Seattle, my outlook was toward the Pacific. On the way to a job in Tokyo or Shanghai, I stopped in Hawaii to make some money. By the time I had done that as a reporter and editor, Pearl Harbor changed plans for all of us. So it was not until after the war that I was able to continue my journey, as a civilian employee of the Army, in the occupation of Japan.

The first job was rather routine, but as time went on, the job got better, and I found myself becoming deeply involved in a most exciting enterprise.

Japan Occupation: Civil Information and Education (CI&E)

Q: What specifically did you do?

O'BRIEN: The first part of it was to analyze the Japanese press and magazines. That was routine. That developed into a job which was under the policy and programs part of the Civil Information and Education section of the occupation. This section of the occupation, SCAP, as it was called, Supreme Commander Allied Powers...

Q: That was General MacArthur.

O'BRIEN: That was General MacArthur. The purpose of this section was to revise the educational system in Japan and to preserve their arts and monuments, which was well done by Ken Bunce, and to work with the Japanese Government in explaining to the people the importance of their new constitution, their new civil code, their criminal code, land reform, the range of astonishing developments that took place in the late Forties.

Q: This was in 1947-48?

O'BRIEN: Right.

Q: Under the Supreme Commander, under General MacArthur, how was that organized? You said Ken Bunce ran it. Was it an office of Civil Affairs?

O'BRIEN: Well, Ken Bunce was a branch chief. Civil Information and Education was on the same level as other large parts of the occupation. We had the misfortune of having as a chief a lieutenant colonel in the United States Marine Corps. Nothing against him, but he was up against two-star Army generals, his opposite numbers in other sections of SCAP. But he had been in Japan before the war and was a competent enough guy.

We had, then, the responsibility, as I mentioned, of working with the Japanese, both their private and government groups, in explaining these tremendously important reforms, and to win acceptance for them. Now, clearly, you simply couldn't go out and say, “General MacArthur says you have to believe in this new constitution.” We had to win Japanese support and develop with them information programs involving all the media that were available, and they were all available.

Q: Actually what methods, what media, what programs did you employ in this?

O'BRIEN: Well, as an example, the press, although technically under SCAP control, was fairly free. It could not, obviously, argue against the occupation, but by using our connections with the press, we would encourage interviews with people who were free of a taint of the militarism of Japan.

Q: Did you, for instance, license editors to start papers and have them?

O'BRIEN: No. The old Japanese papers were permitted to resume, including Akahata, the Japanese Communist newspaper. Now, as I said, it was quite clear they could not declare war on the occupation. They had to mind their P's and Q's on that. But we had a determined policy that came from MacArthur himself—freedom of the press short of saying that MacArthur is a bum.

Q: This was, at that time, under the auspices of the U.S. Army.

O'BRIEN: Yes.

Q: Approximately how many Americans were involved in this kind of a major re-education program?

O'BRIEN: Oh, gosh, Tom, I don't know. I worked side by side with people in uniform. Many then converted to civilian status. You'd be working with the same person again. So it's hard to put a number on it. I just don't know.

Q: At that time, if I remember correctly, the whole concept of cultural centers, information centers, in Germany they were called Amerka Hauser—in Japan, I don't know what they were called—also got started at that time and became a very prominent element of this program.

Our first effort was to strengthen their own libraries and to bring in books that they needed. The actual cultural centers began, as I recall, after the occupation, and as part of what

USIS brought in. [Editor's Note. Before the Occupation ended, the CI&E section had established 24 libraries (Bunka Senta) all local costs of which were financed by the Army from GARIOA, local currency accounts controlled by SCAP. American center directors, books, and vehicles were supplied by Army appropriated funds. These 24 centers were taken over by the Department of State's U.S. Information and Education Office (USIE—the predecessor of USIA) when the peace treaty became effective on April 29, 1952. Abroad USIA installations are called USIS.]

Success of Occupation Program: Role of Information and Education Effort

Q: How would you evaluate this overall effort? Do you think it largely contributed to the democratization of Japan, or was it, in a way, tangential or inconsequential to the overall development of the new Japan?

O'BRIEN: Well, I'm clearly prejudiced. I think that it was a remarkably successful occupation, one that you only need to turn to the Wall Street Journal any day and see how successful Japan is economically. We find that their democratic system works, there are honest elections, there's a vigorous free press. Land reform has certainly taken root. We introduced reforms that have become permanent. Now, the constitution is referred to from time to time as imposed; that's correct. But it hasn't been thrown out. When we take a look at Japan's recovery and its power today, I think we have to say the occupation deserves some credit for innovation, for ideas that won acceptance by the Japanese. They could not be imposed; they had to be sold to the Japanese. They were sold, and I give them much of the credit, clearly. So I look back on a joint enterprise with pride.

Q: Would you agree with me in what I said at the beginning, that I thought that these activities that we carried on in Japan—and, of course, in Germany, too—were among those that really started this whole idea of public diplomacy blooming, as far as the U.S. Government was concerned?

O'BRIEN: I think that's a fair conclusion, Tom. We certainly learned much in Japan that had validity later when the peace treaty was signed. But there was a momentum created in that period, because in Japan, we were clearly dealing with dynamic people, people of great intelligence, determined to get back into the mainstream of world society. As one of my Japanese friends said, “We want to get back to dealing with respectable people.” They had been cut off so long that they were hungry to get back into the mainstream. This is where, in my job, I found myself increasingly becoming a bridge between Japanese groups, who were out of touch with people in America. The United Nations was the first example. The Japanese were eager, eager, eager from the beginning of talk about the U.N., to become a part of it. They saw this as a return to decency, and I found myself swamped with requests for information about the U.N., set up a relationship with Wilder Foote, who then was Press and Publications chief at the U.N., and with American groups, private groups that were supporting the U.N., all of which the Japanese would have done in due time, but they were out of touch with much of the rest of the world. So it was in that sense that we were a bridge.

Q: You had experience with Japanese people and Japanese culture. Was it difficult for an American or Americans who had entirely different history and different cultural experience to relate and be able to work with Japanese?

O'BRIEN: Oh, of course. Of course.

Q: How did that resolve itself?

O'BRIEN: Oh, you simply had to rely on good interpreters, in many cases, or on Japanese who had lived abroad. It would be a truly arrogant American, with the exception of those who were perhaps born in Japan, who would say he understood the Japanese and their reaction to all things. So, sure, that cultural barrier, the language barrier was always there, but that didn't discourage us, because both sides were willing to try to make it work. This

was the key to it. The Japanese saw it was in their interest to make it work, and that was the big thing.

Q: Why did we never broadcast in Japanese on the Voice of America?

O'BRIEN: We did.

Q: When did this start?

O'BRIEN: It started just after the war. Yes, and went on until—oh, it was the Fifties when it was decided that the Japanese had such an astonishingly effective radio system of their own that we weren't reaching much of a market. We had at the time, also, to bring each year from Japan the latest announcers, because the Japanese language was changing. And so we had to constantly improve, but it finally became a budget victim. Q: When?

O'BRIEN: I would say about the late Fifties.

Q: Is there anything else that you find significant that you would like to mention about your Japanese experience?

O'BRIEN: Roger Baldwin, who was founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, was brought out to Japan by Douglas MacArthur. An unlikely combination, isn't it?

Q: Absolutely.

O'BRIEN: MacArthur—people can find fault with him in many, many ways, but he was a liberal in the sense that he wanted to have the Japanese people become aware of civil rights. Baldwin came out and worked mainly with the legal section of the occupation. Then there was this job of trying to explain who he was, what he was doing, what his thoughts were, how they might apply to Japan. That fell in my lap, and it was a wonderful experience. It was curious that Roger Baldwin, a very well educated and sophisticated man, had to be convinced that the Japanese did not attach as much importance to the

rights of the individual as they did to the rights of the family, but he learned that you had to convert the idea of civil liberties into a different context in Japan, and to relate it to the family importance. Roger and I became good friends, and we continued our friendship when I came back here. Norman Cousins came out. He was editor of Saturday review then. I forget how I happened to get in touch with him, but he was looking for a woman named Shizue Kato, who, before the war, had been a very active feminist and a peace leader in Japan. Through some Japanese friends, we got Norman in touch with her. There were many other people of such caliber who came through. They were often turned over to us because we had the connections with the press, with other media, so they could pass on their message.

The Indonesian Experience

Q: Let's close off with the Japanese experience and possibly go on to something else. Your next foreign assignment, Jack, was Indonesia, where you were the public affairs officer, in this case the country director of USIS program. By that time, we had USIA and we had a fairly regular type of organization and program in Indonesia. Am I correct?

O'BRIEN: That's true.

Q: Tell me about something that particularly you found of great interest in Indonesia at this time. First of all, let's get the dates down.

O'BRIEN: I went to Indonesia in '53 and left in '56. I was there two-and-a-half years. I had been absolutely enchanted by Indonesia when I went through the area as Far East branch chief for IPS.

Q: The Press Service. O'BRIEN: Yes. The country was just overwhelming—13,000 islands, over 100 million people. Communications problems of the first order, but again a willingness to hear from the outside, a desire to. We had a first-rate library in Djakarta, we had branches in Surabaya and in Medan. Surabaya is in Java; Medan, of course, is in

Sumatra. Then we opened one later in Padang, also in Sumatra. We had active exchange programs, a very good use of our material by the press, and we turned out a monthly magazine which we had printed in Holland for financial reasons. There was a fairly good staff, but it was hard, frankly, to get first-rate local employees. English was a problem. We could get those who spoke Dutch fairly well. But we, nevertheless, got some good ones. I would describe the program overall as being rather soft. There was no market for vigorous anti-Communist material.

Q: This was when Sukarno was President?

O'BRIEN: That's correct.

Q: Did the government put restrictions on you?

O'BRIEN: Not directly, but as an example, if our publications went out of line, I'd get a call from the foreign office or someone else saying, “Let's not get into that subject.” But overall, you had to sense how far you could go. A couple of interesting developments during that time. Ted Streibert had become, as you know, the first director of USIA, and I believe it was his first trip overseas in that capacity that brought him to Indonesia.

Ted brought with him a packet of books. This was during the period of the Army's campaign to promote people's capitalism, and he wanted to present the books to a ranking Indonesian official. I arranged for us to call on the foreign minister, a rather gentle, shy Javanese gentleman, who was pleased to receive us and pleased to receive the books, which Ted explained very carefully—the man understood English quite well—that it reflected an idea about America that was not commonly known overseas, and he hoped that the foreign minister would find time to read some of the books. The foreign minister thanked him and said to Ted, “I wonder if I may make a suggestion about this program.”

And Ted said, “Why, by all means. Please give me your ideas.”

He said, “Well, I just don't think that our people will understand the term 'people's capitalism.' It's not a phrase that we're familiar with and it doesn't translate well into Indonesian.” He said, “Perhaps some other term could be used.”

Streibert said, “Golly, I'm glad to hear you comment on this. What would your suggestion be?”

The foreign minister said, “Well, maybe a term something like 'New Deal.'” [Laughter] Streibert, a card-carrying Republican if there ever was one, looked at me as if, “By golly, what kind of trap have I fallen into?” He sputtered and said, well, he didn't think that was quite appropriate for this administration. I had to explain later to the foreign minister the meaning of New Deal in the United States. It brings to mind, Tom, some of the other campaigns that we had over the years. You remember at one time we had one called “Philippines: Showplace of Democracy.”

Q: Right.

O'BRIEN: Then we had one called “Militant Liberty.”

Q: Right.

O'BRIEN: Then we had one called “Atoms for Peace.”

Q: Right.

O'BRIEN: These were . . .

Q: “Open Skies.”

O'BRIEN: “Open Skies.” Well, this reflects the American desire to capsulize these ideas and concepts as they do on Madison Avenue. Which reminds me that at a later date, when Ed Murrow became director, and he was on the Hill trying to explain to a congressional

committee that we were not in the business of selling soap. Little did he know that at that very minute, his man in Bangkok, Jack O'Brien, was selling soap, in effect, because Lever Brothers, which manufactures various products in Thailand, was using messages that we had devised on the back of their soap packages. [Laughter] And so around the country you could see Lever Brothers soap selling a program originated by USIS. Anyway, unfortunately, Ed died before I had a chance to tell him that story.

The 1955 Bandung Conference

In Indonesia, also, I'd say the high point when I was there was the Bandung Conference of 1955. This was the Asian-African Conference of some consequence.

Q: It was a Third World conference.

O'BRIEN: Yes, and it brought such people as Nehru and U Nu and Zhou En-lai, a really impressive gathering. Our instructions were to stay the hell away from it. It had absolutely nothing to do with the United States, we were not to become involved in it in any sense.

Q: What year?

O'BRIEN: '55. And so that was the word, a joint message from State, USIA, everybody else: “Stay away from it.” Well, there was one little problem—American reporters were pouring into the place. There was never any hotel space in Djakarta anyway that was any good; it was always a tight situation. So a man named Roeslan Abdulgani, who was the ranking career man in the foreign ministry, called me up one day. He said, “Jack, old friend, I've got a problem.”

I said, “Now, Roeslan, what's your problem?” Roeslan Abdulgani had been giving me some bad times in the past about getting American correspondents in, so I was going to milk this for all I could.

He said, “Well, some of your people (trying to put the blame on me), some of your reporters are coming to the Bandung Conference, and we have room for them at Bandung, but we hadn't realized that some of them want to stay at least overnight in Djakarta, and we simply have no room.”

I said, “Well, I'm not in the hotel business, Roeslan. What do you want me to do?”

“Oh,” he said, “come on now. Some of you Americans have big houses, and maybe you could squeeze them in.”

Well, I said, “I've got to get permission from the ambassador to get involved at all. You know this is not our party; it's yours.” So I went to Hugh Cumming, who was the ambassador, and he said, “Well, I'll try to find out.” So word came back in a day or two that PAO O'Brien and press officer Jerry Donohue would be permitted to meet the planes coming in, to try to assist American correspondents. So Jerry and I did that, and there were a lot of them. My wife went literally door to door to Americans and said, “Have you got a mattress or anyplace you can put up these guys?” And I would call from the airport —once in a while the phone would work—and say, in effect, “Put more water in the soup, because we've got extra guests that we didn't know about.”

Well, among the correspondents who came was one Adam Clayton Powell.

Q: Oh, really?

Congressman Adam Clayton Powell at Bandung

O'BRIEN: He was Congressman Adam Clayton Powell from New York State, and he sent a wire in advance, saying he did not—repeat not—want to be treated as a congressman, but as a reporter for the—I've forgotten the name, some paper in Harlem. So he came in on a plane that was owned or leased by Carlos Romulo, then the foreign minister of the

Philippines. Powell got off the plane, a very impressive, big guy. I introduced myself, and he said, “Where's the ambassador?”

And I said, “Well, sir, we had instructions from Washington saying you did not want to be treated as a congressman. You're being treated as a correspondent, and therefore you are being met by the public affairs officer and press officer.”

“Take some notes,” he said. He wanted me to arrange a party for all the press people, he wanted me to send a telegram to President Eisenhower saying that he'd arrived safely and everything was under control, send a personal message to his wife—at that time, it was Hazel Scott, the wonderful jazz pianist. And so that was the beginning of my association with Adam Clayton Powell.

Well, he went up to Bandung, and he was on the phone every night. We soon got to be on a first-name basis. For some reason, he wanted to get copies of Esquire magazine, which in those days, I guess, was sort of the Playboy of its day. If we ever got it at all, it would come in about a year later by schooner.

Anyway, he was really after the liberation of four or five American pilots who had been downed in what we then called Communist China. So one day, at a screening of some kind at Bandung, Adam Powell arranged to seat himself next to Zhou En-lai, and to make a pitch for the release of these American pilots. Zhou En-lai heard him for a while, and then he turned to him and said, “No speak English.” Zhou En-lai spoke English as well as Adam Powell did. [Laughter] So he didn't score well on that one, but when he left Indonesia, I saw him off, he in Carlos Romulo's plane, and I was not sorry to see him go. He'd been of no help, though I had come to like him personally. So he was in the plane, and the propellers were revved up, ready to take off, and I said, “Now, Adam, you've got all your papers?”

He felt around and said, “Oh, my God, I've lost my passport.” Well, I had happened to see Adam Clayton Powell with a local woman, and he was showing her his passport, apparently to let her know where all he'd been.

So I raced back into the airport, and there this woman did have his passport, I snatched it from her and took it back to Adam, put it in his pocket. He fastened his seatbelt. I lied and said, “Adam, come back anytime, really. You should see more of the country.”

A month or so later, an article appeared in a magazine in the States in which Adam Clayton Powell criticized the American embassy for not giving him proper treatment during the Bandung Conference. I never saw Adam Powell again, and I didn't want to. But the Bandung Conference was an important gathering, and it set in motion a lot of activities around the Third World.

Q: Was the USIS operation at that time and the administration of Ted Streibert in the late Fifties a sort of normal operation, the type of which we have now in our major countries, major country posts?

O'BRIEN: I think so. It was limited, as I said earlier, because there were certain political boundaries you had to observe. There was no point in coming in with a heavy anti-Communist dose; it would not have been accepted, nor would it have been permitted. But there were a number of things you could do. There was always a great interest about the United States, and you could build a lot of activities around that. Our library was first-rate, and indeed, it was drawn upon heavily by government officials. We had good relations with the press. Yes, I would say pretty much from what I understand is going on today, it was a normal program.

The Exchange of Persons Program

Q: Did you have an exchange program?

Martha Graham Troupe in Indonesia

O'BRIEN: Oh, yes. It was active. One of the most successful exchanges we ever had was when Martha Graham and her people came to Djakarta. Martha Graham was an absolute whiz, a wonderful woman who did exactly the right things. She made clear to begin with that she had drawn heavily on Javanese dancing in creating her own modern dance. This, of course, struck just the right note with the Indonesians. She gave demonstrations and seminars and all that. A guy named Charlie Tambu was editor of the Times of Indonesia, an English-language paper, and he just loved to pull the eagle's feathers. It was just before Martha Graham's visit that John Foster Dulles declared that Goa should not be returned to the Indians. Well, this outraged Tambu. I had dinner with him one night at our house, and I mentioned that Martha Graham was coming. He said, “Why do you bring these silly dancers out here? We don't care about that. Bring us somebody that's important.” I said, “Charlie, she's pretty good, I hear. Let's see.” So when she came, I made a point of inviting Charlie and his wife to the performance, and we had a late dinner at our house after the performance. I invited the Tambus and arranged for him to sit with Martha Graham. It wasn't more than ten minutes later that I looked around, and Charlie had his face in his hand, and he was looking up admiringly at Martha Graham; she had absolutely enchanted him. She knew a lot about Islam, and she was talking about that. Charlie, in a couple of days, had an editorial in his paper, “Why can't the United States Information Service bring more people like Martha Graham here to Indonesia?” the editorial asked. [Laughter] It was a triumph.

Exchange Program: Sammy Lee, Olympic Diver

Sammy Lee, the diver, the American of Korean ancestry, who won at two or three Olympics, was a sensation. Sometimes you'd get some Swiss bellringers you didn't really want or need, but in those days, State would say, “Well, they are going to Singapore anyway, they might as well go to Djakarta.”

The VOA Years

Q: Shall we leave Indonesia for the moment and continue, especially your years in, first, Burma and then Bangkok. Before we get into that, I think it would be of interest, because you were the Deputy Director of the Voice of America from 1959 to 1961, and in view of the fact that my own interest and my own involvement with the Voice before that time, as a reporter in Munich and later on the same job that you had, my interest is considerable. I think maybe we'd just like to talk for a few minutes about your job in VOA. Who was the director at that time of Voice of America?

O'BRIEN: Henry Loomis.

Q: Henry Loomis was the director. He was the director, actually, for a very long time.

O'BRIEN: That's right.

Q: And the Voice of America, which moved from New York to Washington in 1953, was ensconced during those years already in Washington, and the one thing that is of particular interest to me and maybe to others, too, is the Voice of America, until about 1958, had really been a major Cold War anti-Communist instrument. In 1958 or thereabouts, the policy in regard to the Voice changed. I'm interested in the development of that change for the Voice to become really similar to the BBC as a worldwide reliable authoritative source of information and news emanating, of course, from the United States. Were you involved in this change from one side to the other?

O'BRIEN: Those forces were in motion before I arrived. Incidentally, I had been scheduled to go to Cairo as PAO, and Henry Loomis decided that he wanted me. So I struck a deal with Henry. I said, “I really want to go back to the field. One year is no good, but perhaps two years.” So Henry said, “Fine, Jack,” and kept his word, as he always did.

Origin of VIA Charter

I'd been there less than a week when Henry gave me a stack of papers—I'm not exaggerating—at least eight or ten inches deep, which represented the efforts of a number of people to create either a charter or a directive to the Voice of America.

Q: Even then.

O'BRIEN: Even then. And those documents were written by, among others—the names will be familiar to you—Barry Zorthian, Bob Goldman, Sandy Marlow, Len Reed. There were many others. They varied in length and in philosophy. Underlying many of them was the hope that VOA could become another BBC. Henry asked me to come up with something that would be acceptable “uptown,” as the term was in those days for headquarters of USIA, and said he could use a draft fairly soon because of the trend toward a BBC-type directive. I decided to stay home one day, and I went through all these ideas. It was largely a matter of boiling down some of them. The following day, I turned a draft over to Henry. With the exception of three or four words, what I put together is now called the Voice of America Charter, which is now the law of the land.

In 1984, USIA World carried an article about the Voice of America Charter, and it said nothing about how it really had evolved. So I wrote a letter to Henry—which I happen to have a copy of and will give you, Tom—in which I reviewed just what I've told you, and said that he might want to search his memory and see if that's what he recalled as well. Within 48 hours, I had a call from Henry in Middleburg, saying his memory was absolutely the same as what I reported was the origin of the Voice of America directive-charter. The main point then was not to call it a charter. George Allen told us, “If you do, you're not going to get it by the Hill. You're not going to get it past the White House. It suggests too much independence. Call it a directive.” So that's the way it came out then. What prompted my letter to Loomis at this time was a statement by Chuck Percy, then a senator from Illinois, who claimed that he, in effect, was responsible for the charter. Well, he was the man who got it through the Senate, so in that sense, he was.

Q: In many respects, if I might just interject, even though this is an interview of you, just since you mention Chuck Percy, when I was at the Voice as deputy director, at that time I was acting director because there was no director at the Voice, at one of the authorization hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Percy was chairman at that time, and among the statements he made which I certainly appreciated, he said to me, "Under this charter, under this law." Mind you, this was in 1978, and the law had been passed in 1975, capsulating or incorporating this charter into public law. He said, "Mr. Tuch, if you let anyone in this government or outside of the government, in this country or abroad, if you let anyone interfere with the news broadcasts of the Voice of America, you are breaking the law." Which is something that any VOA news editor or VOA director took to heart.

O'BRIEN: Well, I have a copy of my letter to Loomis, and you may want to add this as an attachment to the tape, Tom.

Q: Right.

VOA Transmitter Construction Program

O'BRIEN: That was one. Another activity that took more time, and which also is extremely interesting, was VOA real estate. Henry was a first-rate guy to work for, and when he'd go out of the country, you were in charge. If you goofed, too bad, but you'd sink or swim. On real estate, we had a megawatt we were trying to peddle. It was on the docks in Beirut, and Ed Martin, VOA's chief engineer, and I looked all over to see if it was intact, looking for a place to put it. (We didn't find one until later.) Then we had a deal with Turkey, and the Turks were literally poised to sign an agreement—we were going to have a facility in Adana—when overnight, every Turk we'd been doing business with was thrown out of office in a coup and were sent to some island God knows where. So that negotiation went down the drain.

An easy one was with BBC. They wanted to increase the power of transmitters we shared with them. But then there was the megawatt—medium wave, of course—and Thailand. We could not sell the Thai on the megawatt at that time. But three or four years later, in 1964 or 1965, the Thai were in a different mood because of the Vietnam War, and we worked out a very satisfactory agreement. They got to use it and we did, too.

So all these take time, clearly. We won't permit a foreign government to put transmitters on our soil. Look at it from that point of view, and you realize what we are up against. I'm astonished, frankly, that we don't have more trouble in some countries today, where there is violence, internal disputes, and where they could easily take the anti-American form of blowing up our transmitters. I'm astonished and proud that that hasn't happened so far.

That's why this megawatt transmitter in Bangkok is one that I was involved in during my time with the Voice. It was a medium-wave transmitter at the time, but it was able to broadcast into the People's Republic of China, in the southern part. It was listenable within China. It was a very, very effective instrument.

Q: One of the things I wanted to ask you about in VOA, George Allen, contrary to some of his predecessors and also to some of his successors, his idea was the Voice should broadcast in English 24 hours a day, like the BBC, and that English was really the important element of the Voice of America. Did that become a major issue during your time?

O'BRIEN: English was increased, but we also at that time created what was called special English.

Q: Right.

O'BRIEN: This was the one with a very limited vocabulary, and one that, I understand, has been very successful. So that satisfied George. I think he saw that as a reasonable compromise.

1959 Cessation of Russian Jamming of VOA

A story that would interest you especially, Tom, is of how we learned about the stopping of jamming when Khrushchev came to this country. Q: Yes, in '59.

O'BRIEN: In '59. We had a nice little guy—I don't remember his name—who had a monitoring gimmick on top of the VOA building, and he kept us aware of changes in what other international broadcasters were up to in a technical sense. This little guy came down to me one morning and said, “Jack, they've stopped jamming. The Russians have stopped jamming.”

I said, “You've got pretty hard evidence, have you?”

He said, “Yep. My little machine tells me it's true.”

So I called George Allen, the Director of USIA.

(Henry Loomis was out of town.) I said, “I think they've stopped jamming. I'm putting in calls around the world to see if it can be confirmed.”

He said, “Get me word as soon as you can and I'll call the White House.”

So I put in calls to our people anyplace. I couldn't get them for one reason or another. I finally said, “Get me Lee Brady, the PAO in Moscow.” I said, “Is it true, Lee?”

He said, “Of course it's true.”

I said, “Okay, I can go with that, then?”

“Sure, go with it.”

So I called George, and George called the White House, and you know how that ended, with selective jamming after Khrushchev left. That's when our problems began.

Eisenhower personally was interested to know what they were jamming, what sections of broadcasts were being jammed. It was an absolute nightmare. Wanda Allender, now Wanda Washburn, was one of the special assistants in the front office, and she did a wonderful job of keeping track of this. The Russian service had to go on with their regular programs. In the meantime, they had to listen to a tape of what was being jammed and tell us so that we could tell Allen so he could tell the White House. It was a nightmare! How in the world we functioned then, I simply don't know. Wanda has more answers on that than anyone I know.

Q: Just to add to this, again, my job when I was in Moscow as the sole USIS representative in '58, '59, before Lee Brady came and I became Lee's assistant, was to monitor at that time the jamming of the Voice of America. I had a schedule. Every night I had to listen to all the frequencies, and I had to record the identity of the jammer, who identified themselves every 30 seconds by Morse Code. You had to learn the Morse Code.

O'BRIEN: Oh, it's amazing you survived!

Q: And then, of course, when jamming stopped or was switched to partial jamming, to content jamming, I was relieved, of course. I didn't have to just listen to the damn signal, but I could at least listen to some transmissions. But it became much harder, because before that, I just had to record the Morse Code signals. Now I had to record what was being jammed and what was not being jammed every night.

Burma Assignment

After your Voice tour of duty, you went as PAO to Burma for a relatively short time. But that also was a rather significant period, so if you have any comments about Burma, please tell me.

O'BRIEN: Well, again, Burma was a country that fascinated me, and as I said earlier, I'd asked Henry to agree to a two-year hitch at the Voice, and he kept it almost to the day. Burma then was a fairly wide open program.

We had two active branch officers, one at Mandalay and one at Moulamein, with good libraries at both, and by all odds, the best library in the country in Rangoon. The library was run by a most remarkable woman named Zelma Graham. Zelma Graham had been in Burma before the war. Her husband was with a Baptist missionary group, and he died there. Zelma was in Burma when the Japanese marched in and marched out through India. As they walked along the road in India, an American Army captain in a jeep spotted her, picked her up. His name was Henry Byroade, Hank Byroade, who later became ambassador to several countries. Zelma worked for OWI during the war from India, wanted to go back to Burma after the war, and John Steeves, an OWI friend, said, “Zelma, go back and get yourself a library degree and you will come back.” Zelma did that, and she had, I think, an all-time record for USIS personnel overseas in serving in Burma. She had the supreme satisfaction of having as people coming into her library, people who had come to it as children, in the children's part of the library. So there was a continuity that was unmatched in the country. Moreover, by hook or crook, Zelma had arranged to have a number of Burmese women come and take their library training in the United States. A number of them were at Catholic University] here. So there was built up, in addition to a first-rate library, a first-rate corps of librarians. It's been said by many Burmese that there were three Americans who have had the most lasting impact on that country. One would be Adoniram Judson, the Baptist missionary; number two—this is not necessarily in order—would be Gordon Seagrave, the Burma surgeon, and number three would be Zelma Graham. So that when halfway through my tour in Burma, Ne Win, a military officer, came

back into power, and he closed our branch posts, closed Fulbright, and decreed the library in Rangoon to be closed. Zelma was shattered, and she deserved to cry, as she did. This was her baby, something she'd built up over the years. The Burmese were devastated. On an earlier occasion, they threw stones at the American Embassy, but they carefully stayed away from Zelma Graham's library two or three blocks away; it was their library. But we had to break it up and send books all over the area.

Ken Bunce, then the area director, saw that it was almost a dead program, and Thailand was exploding in every direction, so he transferred me to Bangkok.

Thailand: 1963

Q: When was that?

O'BRIEN: That was in 1963.

Q: In 1963 is when our real involvement in Vietnam and the war started escalating also.

O'BRIEN: Yes.

Q: And you were there for how many years?

O'BRIEN: Four years.

Q: Four years, from '63 to '67, a very significant period not just for you, Jack, but also for American history.

O'BRIEN: Well, it was a very exciting time. We had, I think, an important role in that war. I had an excellent arrangement with Lionel Mosley, then the director of personnel. He would send out people, and I would then assign them wherever they were needed in-country. At one time we had either 12 or 13 branch posts, an American at the post, not each one with a library, of course. All spoke Thai and were the eyes and ears of not just the United

States Information Service, but I made available to the CIA and one or two others, very informal reports of these people who would write to me on their activities working with the Thai Government on security and developments. Security and development—those were the key themes.

Graham Martin was the ambassador, a tough, cool character. We were separated by half a mile from the chancery. I would four times a year bring in my branch people to review what they were doing. Martin asked if he could come over and sit in on our meetings. I said, “Of course. We'll come see you.” No, he wanted to come over. He'd come over and take notes on what our people would observe as they were going through a joint Thai-American information project. They'd observe the status of agriculture, they observed the status of a dam-building project, whatever it was, all very informative.

American Bombing of Vietnam from Thai Bases Begins

Our people were also active in the war, in a special sense. One day in Ubol, one of the country's northeast towns, Rob Nevitt branch PAO, a first-rate guy, was astonished to find some of the hottest airplanes the United States Air Force had zooming in and landing. He didn't have any advance word of it, nor did the governor. The governor came to him. “Who are these people?” [Laughter] I had not been told about it either, but Nevitt, from that point on, worked with the governor to explain who they were, what they were there for, getting the Thai officials to come out and talk with the commanding general, and getting the Americans to be considerate of Thai pride and culture. So the war was being fought in large measure from Thai bases, which the Thai would not admit. Now, in some parts of Asia—it may also be true in other parts of the world—there's reality and the confirmation of reality, two quite different things. So an old correspondent friend of mine, Keyes Beech, of the Chicago Daily News, would come through Bangkok, and he knew every bit of what was going on, the bombing of North Vietnam from Thai bases. I couldn't confirm it. I'd have Keyes out for a drink, and say, “You know, they're just big mosquitos out there, Keyes.” We joked about it. We had to, because the Thai Government would not confirm

reality until—and this became a very delicate operation; it was about as elaborate as a Japanese tea ceremony—the Thai Government, for reasons I'm not still quite certain of, decided at a certain time that they would confirm that American planes were using their territory to bomb North Vietnam. So we had to work out a scheme with the foreign office, State, CINCPAC, and the Pentagon. It was to be at 11:35 p.m., after a dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Bangkok that a Thai reporter I knew would say, “Jack, I understand that tomorrow we're going to have a tour of some of the activity at Thai air bases.”

I said, “Yes, Thah, that's correct. The Thai Government has arranged that.” He and I had rehearsed it in the afternoon.

“What will we see, Jack?”

I said, “You'll see American planes taking off.” I left it open.

“And they'll be taking off for where?”

I said, “North Vietnam.” I said this at 11:35. This was the first official confirmation of what we were doing.

Well, it satisfied the Thai, doing it that way. Of course, we played their game. We needed their real estate. It was done with a delicacy that the Thai appreciated. I don't take credit for it; I was a part of it. So that was an interesting part of the war there.

Q: Was there an insurgency in Thailand at that time?

O'BRIEN: Oh, indeed. The northeast part of the country is the poorest, and the Communists had a foothold there. That's where AID was putting its big projects.

We concentrated in the northeast in publicizing everything that AID was doing, and we were doing a lot. It meant that our people would spend an awful lot of their time out in the

boondocks with the Thai officials, making friends, passing out material, showing our films, getting reports on problems, and so on. So it was very active.

You mentioned, Tom, that we were getting into psychological warfare. We were, indeed. Leonard Marks, then the director of the agency, came through, and he called Barry Zorthian over from Saigon.

Q: Barry, at that time, was . . .

O'BRIEN: Barry was my opposite number in Vietnam. The three of us sat in my house and reviewed what we were doing. Leonard was very good about it. He said, “Look, you guys. I know that Barry's gotten much more deeply involved because he's had to.” He turned to me and said, “Now, Jack, I only tell you don't get me into trouble. Don't get me into trouble.”

I said, “Leonard, I'm following the instructions we've had so far, and I don't see any possibility I can get you into trouble.”

Q: Trouble in what way?

O'BRIEN: Trouble in getting us too deeply involved with the Thai Government in ways that would reflect, possibly, on the United States or on Lyndon Johnson. So it meant we were cooperative, but not to appear that we were leading the Thai into war. Now, I think that same problem plagued Lew Schmidt, my successor, and his successors. When I was transferred back to the front office of USIA, Frank Shakespeare called me in and said that he had heard from Kissinger.

Q: Frank Shakespeare was then . . .

O'BRIEN: Then the director of USIA.

Q: He became that in '68, succeeding Leonard Marks, and remained director until 1972.

O'BRIEN: Yes. I'm jumping ahead just to keep in line talk of psychological warfare, because Frank had heard from Henry Kissinger that USIS in Thailand was doing too many things that the Thai should be doing for themselves.

I've jumped ahead, as I just said, Tom, but I want to follow up on this matter of psychological warfare. When Shakespeare became concerned because of Kissinger's call, he then brought out a lot of the publications and posters that we had been turning out in Thailand, and he kept asking me, “Jack, you've been there. Is it necessary for us to do it? Why can't the Thai do it?”

I said, “They're simply not prepared to do it, and we work closely with them, we share a lot of the costs with them and ideas, but it's a joint enterprise and we look upon them as partners in this.”

Frank was scared, frankly, and he didn't want to cross Kissinger on it. Kissinger apparently read it as our going down the path of getting involved, as we were in Vietnam. I believe our joint programs were then curtailed. Lew Schmidt, my successor, should know.

The Great Success of the Binational Center

But the Thai program was a vigorous one in almost every sense. We had a spectacularly successful binational center. It was created long before I was there, so I take no credit for it. It was called AUA, an abbreviation for American University Alumni Association. It was built on land that was donated by the royal family. The United States Government contributed a little piece of property to round it out. It had night and day English-language teaching. There were all sorts of artistic performances. We had a number of people on contract as teachers. It was the symbol of American-Thai cooperation, and it would be the last thing, as I told many visitors, the last thing I'd want to give up in our program, because it was bedrock solid, still goes on to this day, as far as I know, one of the most successful in the world.

Q: A huge English-teaching program.

O'BRIEN: Oh, tremendous, yes. People paid for it, too. We had a very active Fulbright program, first-rate. It's interesting to look back on the Thai experience overseas. The Thai, first, oh, since the First World War would send their brightest people to France or to England. Since that time it's overwhelmingly been to the United States, so there's a very, very large number of Thai who have gone to school in our country. Indeed, there's sort of a special club there of American women who have married Thai, and they have regular meetings, when we were there, at least, at the AUA. Our friendship is deep. We all know about what the Thai did in World War II, in providing hospitality to OSS and helping us in a number of ways. So we were dealing in a very, very favorable atmosphere, and you could go almost as far as you wanted, except—and I'll never forget this—the first Thai graduate of MIT, a wonderful, dignified man named Phra Bisal, and I used to have lunch regularly. He was head of the AUA.

One day I got word from the agency that they had a very elaborate Berlin Wall exhibit they'd like to send out. So I brought it up in the course of lunch with this distinguished Thai, and saw a sort of cloud over his forehead. He said, “Jack, don't put it at the AUA. It's a little too political. Put it in your own library. I want to see it, but put it in your own library.” He was right. We did as he suggested.

We had very good relations with such organizations as the border patrol police, a good outfit. Of course, they had a big job. They had borders with Burma and Laos and Cambodia and Malaya. The head of the border patrol police invited me one time to come with him in his helicopter to the borders and to see what was going on. I said, “Fine.”

We were returning in late afternoon, the last part of the journey back to Bangkok, when the skies literally turned black. It was a big storm. So the general directed that the helicopter go down. Well, it was right in the middle of a rice field, and out of nowhere came dozens of little Thai kids. How many times do you get a helicopter land in your rice field? The storm

was heavy, so the general turned to his aide and said, “Break out the whiskey.” So we all sat and drank and watched the kids playing. The storm showed no sign of letting up, and the general, however, kept looking at his watch. I said, “General, there's no hurry as far as I'm concerned. I have plenty of time. Don't worry about going back to Bangkok in a hurry.”

“Oh,” he said, “I think we'd better take off.” Well, it was still black, but the plane shot up, just like an arrow. Thank God, about a thousand feet up, it was beautiful, crystal clear, sunny. I'm sure my face showed the relief I felt.

Q: The program in Thailand at that time, would you say that it was motivated or guided by our tremendous involvement, because of our efforts in Vietnam, or was it because we realized that Thailand was an important country in terms of U.S. policy?

O'BRIEN: Oh, I think all those factors worked, Tom. Our program was based upon a long friendship, really, and so we had a solid foundation as represented by the AUA. It was on that, then, that we could go into other programs relating to the war in Vietnam, and it was that that enabled us to do things on radio and in joint publications. I never forgot that there was a foundation that had its origins long before we got into war in Vietnam. As far as I'm aware, that friendship still exists. Thailand was and is important to us because of geography, and we've been fortunate in having them as good friends and allies over the years.

Q: I'd like to touch on one more subject this afternoon. What was it like to work with and for Frank Shakespeare? You were special assistant.

Assignment to USIA Front Office The Experience with Director Frank Shakespeare and “Teddy” Weintal

O'BRIEN: After I came back from Bangkok. I went to a job at State, the worst job I've ever had, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, which was set up solely to try to sell the American people on the Vietnam War. It was a loser from the beginning, and

I finally recommended it be abolished. It was, and about that time, Henry Loomis came back into the agency as number two guy at USIA. So Henry said, “Please come back,” and I was delighted to do that, having worked for him before at the Voice. Frank I did not know, and I was surprised to find that he didn't know Henry very well. Frank was not well organized. He found the Washington rhythm took some time to get used to. He wasn't quite certain who all the people were, didn't know much about the budget, didn't know anything about it, really. And I think he came in with a certain distrust of career people. My work was primarily with Henry, anyway. I knew his style, I knew how many times I could go in to Henry and just say, “Henry, don't sign this.” I could do his staff work for him, and he would, nine times out of ten, follow my recommendations. We set up an executive committee, which decided on major ideas and allocation of resources for the agency. I would prepare the agenda for that and arrange for the paperwork. Right there on the spot, when Henry had made a decision, I'd record it and see it was carried out. Frank did not participate in that. He didn't seem to understand it. Then an interesting thing happened. On a Friday afternoon, Henry Loomis told me, as he was leaving the office, “Jack, a guy named Weintal is coming in Monday morning. I don't know who he is. Apparently it's a White House deal. Frank doesn't know him either. Will you find out what he's here for, what we're supposed to do with him?”

I knew who Teddy Weintal was. He was a columnist for Newsweek, and he really wanted to work at State, but they sent him over to USIA. A very dignified old fellow, born in Poland, of aristocratic background. In came Teddy, and I introduced myself. I showed him an office, and he said, “What do I do now?”

I said, “Well, I think the best thing to do is get you acquainted with some of the traffic.” So I arranged to have low classified stuff sent in to him. I could see he was becoming bored and he kept turning to me for advice and counsel. Neither Frank nor Henry seemed to know how to use him.

So Teddy one day said, “Jack, let's go to lunch.” He took me over to the Metropolitan Club. He said, “This is terribly embarrassing, but I just don't think I'm doing anything worthwhile here.”

I said, “Teddy, you've got to go in and tell Shakespeare what you want to do, what you think you can do.”

He said, “I can't. He's a busy man.” I said, “Look, on the way back after lunch, I'll see if his door is open. I'll go in. I know he's going to go to Europe next week, and I'm going to suggest that you go with him.”

“Oh,” he said, “I can't do it.”

I said, “What do you mean?” So I went back, and sure enough, Frank's door was open. I said, “Frank, we've got this guy Weintal here. I think, really, you'd get more out of him if you'd let him see what we're doing overseas. Why don't you take him along on your trip?”

He said, “Good idea.” One of the major mistakes of my life, Tom, because that started Shakespeare-Weintal trips all over. They would spot a guy in a certain country, didn't like the way he wore his tie or something, transfer him. Orderly personnel procedures were frequently ignored. Weintal endeared himself to Shakespeare, because Teddy knew his way around Georgetown, which Shakespeare was interested in. Teddy arranged for him to meet Alice Roosevelt Longworth. This was one of Frank's ambitions. Teddy warned him not to play poker with her because she cheated. And Teddy arranged for him to get into the Metropolitan Club. This was a very awkward afternoon. Teddy and Henry were both members of the Metropolitan, and they had to bring the new applicant for membership, Frank Shakespeare, to meet some of the boys. But they needed a couple of standbys there. So for about an hour, we sat around the room at the Metropolitan, and none of these boys would show up. Terribly embarrassing. Finally, Henry went out and grabbed a couple

of guys off the floor, brought them in, introduced them to Frank, and that constituted membership, I guess.

But then as time went on, Frank became interested in budget and personnel. Without preparation, without real knowledge of what was going on, he would arbitrarily make decisions overruling the executive committee which had staffed things out. It was difficult for Loomis, because he knew where the money was and how to prepare the budget, and Frank was sort of a dilettante getting into it.

Frank was a very charming guy, but I cannot say that I learned to respect him. He was always very kind, and he found out, as time went on, that although a career guy, I could be helpful. I knew a lot about the agency, knew a lot of the key people, and so many times, when he was packing up to go on a trip, he'd say, “Jack, would you follow up on this and this and this?”

And I'd say, “Sure, of course.” That's what special assistants are for. So it was a very friendly relationship, but never, never as close as I had with Loomis.

The time came when I wanted to get back overseas. I was seeing the same thing in papers on my desk every day, and it got to be, frankly, a bore. But by that time, my wife's health had become such that she couldn't get a physical clearance. We had been separated for one year when she was back here at the Naval Hospital, and I had returned to Bangkok. I wasn't going through that again. So I put in my resignation. It was on a Friday that I resigned. On Monday I reported for the same job and did that until—I think it was Henry Dunlap who succeeded me. Then I did a number of things that consultants do: inspections of Japan and Indonesia, study of the Voice, chairing the selection board. Then I got into the Milton Eisenhower Committee on Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Then I went to work for Loomis again when he became president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. I got caught in a political squeeze there and had to get out, still very good

friends with Henry. It was about that time that I came down with cancer, but that's another story.

Q: Thanks very much.

End of interview